Just Be Ready To Bail Out, OK?

by Lt. Brook Stafford

Every naval aviator loves a good deal, and mine was shaping up to be great. The squadron was sending a detachment to Midland, Texas, to grab lots of good flying weather and knock out a bunch of X's.

The plan was for my form partner and I to fly Form-1 in the local Corpus Christi area, fly form to Midland (with a refueling stop halfway), and finish up the flight with Form-2 in the Midland area. We completed our preflight and took off uneventfully into a sunny sky with scattered clouds. We completed some basic formation maneuvers in the local Corpus Christi area and started our formation transit to Midland. Things started going awry when we checked the weather approaching our halfway refueling stop. Our refueling airfield was below minimums.

The instructors did some consulting over squadron common, and we checked the weather at Midland and at Navy Corpus. Both ends of our flight were reporting weather above minimums, but not by much and with no forecasted improvement. We were at a crossroad: turn back or press on. Both IPs decided we had enough fuel to make it to Midland, so we pressed on.

The training portion of the flight was cancelled, and the IPs took controls to continue our transit. The clouds continued to build, and we had to increase our altitude in 1,000-foot intervals to stay VFR. We donned our oxygen masks when we were forced above 10,000 feet. Reaching 14,000 feet, with no weather improvement forecasted at Midland, we cancelled VFR and received an IFR clearance from ATC. We were in and out of the clouds, and the instructor was keeping our aircraft tight on lead. We both were keeping real close watch on the fuel and our burn rate. The numbers were getting tighter and tighter.

ATC had been vectoring us toward Midland, but the airspace was really busy, and ATC was predicting a delay in the terminal area because of traffic. We had a good TACAN lock on Midland, and at about 90 nautical miles out, with low fuel, we realized we couldn't afford any delays in ATC handling. Both aircraft declared emergency fuel. The unlucky controller on watch that day took it in stride and gave us more

Photo-composite by Allan Amen

direct routing to Midland. He said he would do the best he could on a direct route. As luck would have it, there was an Air Force aircraft heading east towards Midland that declared emergency fuel right after our westbound section did. Now, the unlucky controller had three emergency-fuel aircraft inbound to the same airfield.

We continued getting vectors to the field, and the fuel ticked down. The instructor ordered me to check my parachute and ensure I would be ready to hit the silk if we flamed out. At this point, we were still 40 miles out, and our fuel was at the squadron minimums for landing. ATC vectored us for an instrument approach, but, looking at the approach plate and the chart, we determined that the route to the IAF would add distance, and we couldn't accept it. We were running out of options and fuel, so we had to accept a section, localizer, back-course approach to the field. We broke out at about 300 feet, glad that the airport was right in front of us. Tower cleared us to land on any runway, and we followed lead to an uneventful landing on the off-duty runway.

As we taxied off the runway and our hearts resumed beating, we checked the fuel. We had about 50 pounds on each side, far less than the squadron SOP minimum of 120 pounds per side. After we shut down and exited the aircraft, the instructor remarked, "That was the stupidest thing I have ever done in a T-34."

A police car and a fire truck rolled up. I asked if they were just checking on things, and the IP said they probably were coming to arrest him. They didn't—they just had him fill out the routine paperwork required for all emergency landings. The debrief was rather short and to the point. I continued through the syllabus and finished forms several days later.

I learned that every flight, even routine training, contains risks. Had I been more assertive and urged the instructor not to push our fuel, we would have landed short of our destination but with plenty of gas. Next time, I'll be more involved in the decision-making instead of just being along for the ride.

Lt. Stafford flies with HSL-48 and was deployed in the Mediterranean aboard USS *Anzio* (CG-68) when he submitted this article.

Analyst's comments: The entire aviation community, including the military, continues to produce human-error-mishap rates of nearly 80 percent (67 percent being aircrew). This story describes a common error that is often cited as contibuting to mishaps: being along for the ride. Each member of a crew is exactly that—a member—and as such is responsible for participating in the decision-making process, regardless of seniority, position, or experience. OPNAVINST 3710.7 and FAA regulations both make the aircraft commander responsible for the safe conduct of flight. That doesn't mean subordinate crew members aren't part of the process. Help the aircraft commander—communicate concerns, information and options. Apply risk-management skills and contribute to making informed decisions.

—LCdr. Mike Rogers, Naval Safety Center ACT-ORM representative and ACT-CRM instructor at the C-12 FRS.